

The Federal Interest

A statement of what is believed to be the essence of the interest of the Congress in control of development in Washington was given in the Introduction (page 5). Of course, the Federal Government as an employer also has an interest, identical with that of any other employer, in an efficient and livable city for its employees.

At the present time, the provisions of the Act of 1910 establish absolute controls over height in business districts at 130 feet and in residential districts at 90 feet in order to assure the continued dominance of the Capitol and the Washington Monument and to preserve a relatively even cornice line along individual streets. These limits apply to habitable space and some, but not all, of the usual roof structures. It is believed that there is no justification for asking Congress to change these limits, although there is a need for putting an upper limit on the miscellaneous roof structures.

Therefore, a maximum overall height, to include all roof structures, of 150 feet is proposed for the Central Business District.

There is an apparent inconsistency in the Congressional distinction between commercial and residential districts. Why, one might ask, should a residential building affect the skyline more than a commercial building? Although there is no evidence to show that anyone in Congress was thinking this way, there is a good reason for the distinction. The hills surrounding the center of the city are occupied by residential districts, and a 130-foot building on one of these heights would start from an altitude of as much as 200 feet above the general level of the business district and the base of the Capitol building. Seen from afar (as from the National Airport), a 130-foot apartment building (with roof structures) built on Meridian Hill would reach 350 feet above sea level and appear to be three-quarters of the height of the Washington Monument and taller than the Capitol (elevation 305 at the top of the dome). Therefore, the distinction is worth preserving, as an expression of legitimate federal interest.

The immediate surroundings of important government buildings must be controlled in detail, and hence are not a suitable object for general rules. The Commissioners' Schedule of Building Heights and the Fine Arts Commission form the proper channels for the federal interest here and should be used more fully.

The federal interest in light and air in the streets coincides with that of the private community. The Congressional control of height by street width could therefore be replaced by a zoning control if and when Congress feels that this phase of its interest would thus be adequately protected. This is desirable because the street width provisions have an unwanted by-product of limiting height and bulk erratically over the area of the business district.

The protection of light and air in the streets will be dis-

cussed further below, after other aspects of the height controls are discussed.

Compatibility with Residential Development

The commercial and industrial districts outside of the business center of the city are controlled, in general, so as to prevent the development of buildings which are incompatible with the surrounding residential development. A number of different situations are found.

Small Neighborhood Centers — These retail centers are most intimately associated with residential development. The uses permitted in them and the density permitted will be extremely restricted in order to make them acceptable as neighbors to homeowners who are jealous of the appearance of their neighborhoods. In conformity with this pattern, it is logical to permit only ground floor commercial use.

Community Business Centers — These commercial areas draw on a wider range of services at greater intensity per acre of ground than in the neighborhood centers; therefore the permitted bulk is larger. Parking requirements have been designed to force the developer to shoulder all of the parking load which he creates, since the major part of the trade for such an area will be auto-borne. The parking takes up ground floor space and necessitates putting part of the floor space above ground. A height of three stories will enable the designer, in most instances, to take advantage of the full bulk allowance, provide the necessary parking, and create an interesting design. Yet this is not out of scale with most of the residential areas that the community centers are associated with. Hence a limit of 45 feet is considered adequate. Small theater buildings and the few other special purpose buildings permitted in these centers can also be built within this height.

Major Outlying Business and Employment Centers — Several business centers now exist, and others will develop in time, which accommodate large numbers of office workers as well as retail and service businesses serving larger communities than the purely local shopping centers previously described. The business units involved will need relatively large buildings, consequently a much larger FAR will be allowed. However, parking requirements will be just as stringent so as to protect nearby residential areas. Hence, additional height must be permitted to allow the design of suitable buildings. Nevertheless, these should not be out of scale with the largest residential structures — the eight-story, 90-foot apartment buildings which are permitted in all apartment districts by exception, and in the highest density district as a matter of right. An illustration of the kind of development permitted in this district was given in Figure 6 (page 25).

Heavy Commercial and Light Manufacturing Areas — These areas occur in close association with residential development along major thoroughfares and along railroad lines. Current trends in construction for most of the uses